

MERCER COUNTY GANG TASK FORCE
Status Report for 2006
Prepared February 2007

In 2005, Mercer County Executive Brian M. Hughes directed the Mercer County Department of Human Services to convene a task force to develop a comprehensive response to the presence of gangs in Mercer County. The Mercer County Gang Prevention & Intervention Task Force, under the direction of the Human Services Department was co-chaired by Gary DeBlasio, Executive Director of Corner House and John Duarte, Social Worker at the Mercer County Youth Detention Center. The Mercer County Gang Prevention & Intervention Task Force Report details the group's efforts, research and recommendations for government and community action.

A key recommendation was to convene an ongoing countywide task force to assess the gang problem and develop coordinated action plans to reduce youth gang involvement. The County Executive responded by creating The Mercer County Gang Task Force, whose mission is to place into action the recommendations included in the report.

The new task force, co-chaired by John Duarte – MCYDC and Randolph Holland, Life Ties Inc., is divided into two working groups: the Government Group comprised of 15 members and the Community Group comprised of 17 members. The groups meet separately to work on their respective recommendations, and then come together for informational meetings and for joint working meetings. John and Randy co-chair both working groups. James Chambers, Confidential Aide to County Executive Hughes, facilitates the Government Group and Patrick Cacacie, Vice-President, Resource Investment, facilitates the Community Group. At an initial joint meeting, each group reviewed the report and selected, by vote, recommendations to address as outlined below.

The Government Group's Priority Recommendations:

- “Create a county-wide transportation system for youth to attend social service and recreational programs”
- “Establish healthy and constructive relationship with local media”
- “Examine, create and support legislation that addresses gang prevention, intervention and suppression”

Youth Transportation System

The committee met with Marty DeNero of TRADE who feels that the countywide transportation plan is doable. There are a total of about 30 buses; we would only use five for a pilot program. Still to be discussed: (a) drivers,

- (b) driver's schedules (c) programs and sites for the youth to visit,
- (c) monies to make the program happen (d) signage to identify buses while transporting youth

The committee also met with Sam Frisby, City of Trenton who highlighted the SCOOP program and provided the needs assessment used to develop it.

Challenges to achieving goals include funding, liability, activities and venues, adult supervision/volunteers.

Next Step would be to secure funds, explore grants, and determine acceptable venues/activities for youth countywide.

Media Relations

Our contact person for addressing this recommendation is Julie Willmot, Director of Communications and Policy for the County of Mercer. The goal is to establish relationships with local media allowing us to raise public awareness about the Mercer County Gang Task Force and to highlight its accomplishments. Among the recommendations of the committee are the convening of an editorial board with County Executive Hughes, other elected officials and community leaders still to be identified.

Legislative Advocacy

The government group composed a letter signed by County Executive Hughes (see attachment) to Governor Corzine in support of a package of anti-gang legislation sponsored by Assemblywoman Bonnie Watson-Coleman and others.

The committee will continue to monitor and consider future legislation.

A. 1-877 AT RISK Youth hotline

This toll-free line was implemented by the City of Trenton in April of 2006. The Government Group is exploring means of collaborating with the city to expand this initiative throughout the county.

B. YOUTHSTAT

The County has partially funded a data analyst position of YOUTHSTAT. YOUTHSTAT is weekly roundtable of stakeholders representing an array of youth services and law enforcement throughout the county who review and cross reference individual juvenile cases, to ensure that all available resources are put in place to create an environment of success for that youth.

The Community Group's Priority Recommendations:

- In collaboration with local school districts develop a comprehensive action plan to respond to and prevent future gang activities in the schools – elementary through high school
- In partnership with the corporate sector, develop employment and career opportunities for youth

School Gang Policies-

The committee is in the process of contacting all schools throughout the county to gather gang policies. This will enable the committee to review and compare policies to determine uniformity.

Prevention/Intervention Programs

The committee will survey existing successful gang prevention programs to select those effective programs worthy of becoming models in the county. In order to ensure that we are addressing the needs of youth during non-school hours, the committee will conduct three surveys, to include: superintendents, PTOs and principals. The purpose of gathering this information is to ensure that we consider the needs as recommended by the administrators of each municipality. This would include current or future programs and funding requests. A subgroup has been formed to develop a draft of the surveys.

Youth Job Readiness

The committee is in the process of researching current job opportunities and readiness programs (public and private) to explore possible areas of collaboration with WIB. The contact for this task is Charles Hill, Director of Mercer County Office of Economic Opportunity.

In addition to the above initiatives, several full meetings have been held to share information at which the following topics were presented:

- Safe Cities and Ceasefire – Rutgers Police
- School and law enforcement collaboration - Mr. Raymond Broach Superintendent of Ewing Public Schools
- Role of Resource Officers in schools - Detectives Anthony Messina and Timothy Copeland of the Ewing Township Police